



## **Perspectives: Cross-Pressures on Public Service Media**

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## Chapter 5

# Perspectives: Cross-Pressures on Public Service Media

**Abstract:** Through online services, the Scandinavian public service broadcasters have managed to retain strong positions as public service media (PSM) among the audiences in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Social and political changes in the Scandinavian populations influence the ways PSM involve themselves in conflicts that relate to religion. The growing cultural and religious diversity of the Scandinavian countries, along with digitalization and commercialization, shape PSM publics with varying, and perhaps conflicting, interests and needs. This has put the PSM under political pressure to alter their programming. On the one hand, their obligation to provide a common, and perhaps even a unifying, public space for the whole nation, in some cases, has become more pronounced. On the other hand, they are encouraged to take into account the multiplicity of voices and subcultures that exist among their audiences and users.

**Keywords:** public service media, radio, television, religion, culture

Public service media (PSM) occupy a strong position in the Scandinavian countries and they continue to play important roles in the dissemination of information and discussions about issues of public interest and contestation involving religion. In some cases, PSM may become the subject of such conflicts when controversies develop around the representation of religion. Our empirical analyses concerning the roles of PSM in such conflicts are spelled out in detail in the subsequent three chapters, with a case study from each of the three countries.

‘Public service media’ are national ‘broadcasting’ corporations that have developed a presence on the Internet alongside ‘linear’ radio and television transmissions. PSM companies may be commercially or publicly funded. In both cases, they have a public mandate that is derived from the national parliaments, and they report their activity to national bodies.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. Firstly, we will characterize the historical origins and institutional contexts of the present Scandinavian public service organizations and their obligations, and compare these to other media systems. Secondly, we consider the contemporary challenges that PSM face in view of both a changing media environment and a more diverse population,

in terms of religion and culture. Thirdly, we provide a framework for the case studies (in Chapters 6, 7, and 8).

## 5.1 Historical Origin and Institutional Context

Although media with public service obligations may be found in many countries around the globe, they clearly have a different and more prominent position in the media systems in Scandinavia compared with, for instance, the role of the public service media in the US or Eastern Europe. In contrast to countries where PSM play minor roles, PSM programmes have historically been utilized by a majority of the populations in Scandinavia. Although there today is competition with other providers, public service radio and television still hold a strong position in the national media landscapes. The historical, institutional, and political contexts of PSM in Scandinavia are important to consider in order to understand the possibilities and dilemmas that public service media face when political, social, and cultural conflicts are increasingly interpreted through religious frames.

The PSM in Scandinavia are the continuation of state-owned corporations under specific broadcasting guidelines and policies that are monitored by bodies appointed by the governments. In effect, there was a radio and television monopoly in all three Scandinavian countries until the latter part of the 20th century. Following digitalization and the spread of the Internet, these corporations have expanded their public service activities to most digital media platforms, for instance, computers, tablets, and mobile phones. The public service broadcasting corporations in Scandinavia have thus moved from PSB, public service broadcasting, to PSM, public service media (Lowe and Bardoel 2007), as these corporations now operate on cross-media platforms (Carpentier, Schröder, and Hallett 2014). The Scandinavian corporations were ahead with these developments. We apply the term PSM to the multi-platform services that emanate from the established ‘broadcasting’ corporations.

PSB in Scandinavia was inspired by the BBC, which was developed in Britain in the 1920s by the first General Director, John Reith. The BBC was founded on the idea that it should not be for-profit, like the private radio companies in the US, nor should it be directly state controlled, as was the case in authoritarian regimes, such as the Soviet Union. Public service also meant national coverage and a national monopoly (Briggs 1995). This was during the early days of radio. Reith considered religious programming to be part of the public service mission and put religion under the national public service monopoly. He introduced religious talks and the broadcast of church services on Sundays, but kept a tight

grip on them. Speakers had to submit their manuscripts to the BBC in advance. The senior clergy were sceptical, as they found the broadcasting of church services to be an invasion of a secular body into a theological domain. Reith answered by developing a church service designed and delivered specifically for radio which became very popular among the audience, but which was contested by the leaders of various religious groups (Wolfe 1984, 3–17). In the BBC's editorial shaping of religious rituals and messages, an early mediatization of religion (see Chapter 4) can thus be observed.

Since the inception of the BBC, the meaning of the concept of 'public service' has changed over time. It has been applied in relation to shifting policy purposes on the role of broadcasting in society, or for various ideological stances. The distinction between American and Scandinavian radio was continued when television was introduced (Linderman 1993). There has been a sliding away from Reith's sense of 'public service' as a public utility, to one where broadcasting is carried out in the service of the public sphere and, further, to broadcasting in the service of the individual listener or viewer (Syvertsen 1999). This latter meaning of the term is strengthened by the intensified commercialization and the many media user options that are given by digitalization, and by the general individualization of society.

## 5.2 The PSM Companies in Scandinavia

It is typically the former monopolies and publicly owned PSM corporations that are listed as 'public service' entities in scholarly works (Syvertsen et al. 2014; Hujanen, Weibull, and Harrie 2013). However, it is reasonable to include commercial corporations with a government-issued mandate and public service obligations.

Denmark's TV2 has public service obligations for both its main national television channel and the regional network, and they form the advertising-funded counterpart to the purely license-financed DR (formerly Danmarks Radio) television outlets. Both companies offer Internet based services. DR also runs public service radio channels. Radio24syv is a licence funded private public service national talk radio channel with public service obligations.

In Norway, NRK (Norsk rikskringkasting), with television and radio channels and Internet services, is the state-owned PSM. There are commercial companies with public service mandates and obligations as well: TV2 offers television channels and applications on the Internet. The radio companies P4 and Radio Norge are both listed as public service (*allmennkringkasting*).

In Sweden, the radio broadcaster SR (formerly Sveriges Radio) and the television branch, SVT (formerly Sveriges Television), are separate public service companies, alongside the educational broadcaster UR (Utbildningsradion), which all also provide Internet services. The three companies are owned by an independent foundation. The Swedish Parliament decides on the mandate of the companies, but is not represented on the boards. There is no acknowledged commercial PSM in Sweden. TV4, the only commercially funded media company that can broadcast from Sweden, pays a yearly fee to the state.

### 5.3 Scandinavian PSM in a Comparative Perspective

In Northern Europe, PSM have been regarded as a cornerstone of and as a contributor to democracy. However, technological, economic, and political changes challenge the position of PSM (Ibarra, Nowak, and Kuhn 2015). Reality may not match the ideals. Based on a study of 56 countries around the world Damian Tambini (2014) points out the problems that are occurring for the public service media: dwindling political support, governmental interference, declining audience rates, disputes on the PSB remit with private interests, and the contentious transition into digital PSM solutions.

In the Nordic ‘media welfare states’, public service broadcasting and its extension into PSM stands strong on all of the four pillars that are pointed out by Syvertsen et al. (2014): They are considered public goods, enjoy editorial freedom, are part of a wider cultural policy, and they work in cooperation with the state, the media industries and the public as main stakeholders. However, this strong position is challenged by national market competition and the international media environment, and editorial autonomy is always at stake in Nordic public service media (Nissen 2013).

Within the Nordic region, we concentrate on the three Scandinavian countries (see Chapter 1). With the proactive move to public service multimedia companies, the Scandinavian PSBs have defended their position and legitimacy. The political challenge is to maintain a viable balance between demands from the state, the market, and the civil society, e.g. in questions on whether the licence fee should be kept or replaced by another form of funding (Lund and Lowe 2013). The Scandinavian PSBs have managed to keep high user attendance during the transition into PSMs (Nissen 2013). They still dominate listening and viewing figures, but are, at the same time, fighting against dwindling attention among young people and are trying to compete with the growing interest in streaming

services, like Netflix and HBO.<sup>1</sup> The multiplatform series *Skam* from NRK, on young people's identity struggles in relation to love and religion, captured huge audiences in Norway, Denmark, and beyond (Bjerkan and Aanstad 2017, 2), demonstrating that the PSM are able to attract a new generation (Sundet 2017).

Social media and other new media services may mould the meaning and shape of public service media, as 'publics are brought into being through historically specific media practices' (Hirschkind, de Abreu, and Caduff 2017). Contemporary public service media are 'public' primarily as a result of their public mandate, which is issued by the national government to reach the entire population. However, they extend their publicness by inviting their users to actively participate on PSM digital platforms (Lowe 2010), thus catering to collective publics among their audiences (Livingstone 2005; Moe 2010). In sum, they remain public by demonstrating their 'public value' in a competitive media market (Lowe and Martin 2014; Donders and Moe 2011).

## 5.4 Contemporary Challenges to Public Service Media

The ongoing changes with digitalization and commercialization towards a more competitive media environment and the growing differences in the sociocultural background of the public, put cross-pressure on PSM. On the one hand, they are increasingly prompted to cater to audiences as consumers in a media market, and therefore seek to maximize audience ratings. On the other hand, they are obliged to provide cultural programming that primarily caters to minorities or to high-brow segments of the population. While experts may be invited to discuss religious conflicts, audience interests may be geared towards popular coverage of religious topics. The Swedish media scholar Gunilla Hultén points, in a similar vein, to the conflicting pressures on public service media as they balance between the ambition to increase diversity and ensure market shares, and at the same time keep democratic commitments and relate to issues critical for immigration (Hultén 2016, 336).

PSM have to handle the dilemmas that arise of inclusion and exclusion and find strategies to include minority groups without reproducing stereotypes. The logics of the media market, national political considerations, and social and cul-

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant statistics are available from Nordicom, <http://nordicom.gu.se/en/statistics-facts/media-statistics>

tural developments thus interact with each other in various ways, providing both possibilities and constraints through which PSM can engage actively with religious conflicts.

## 5.5 Public Service Under Emerging Diversity

There is a built-in tension in the PSM between facilitating critical discussion and contributing to common cultural points of reference. This also applies to the coverage of religion. The growing cultural and religious diversity of the Scandinavian countries make the public to which PSM cater increasingly diverse, with varying and perhaps conflicting interests and needs. This put PSM under political pressure to alter their programming. On the one hand, their obligation to provide a common, and perhaps even a unifying, public space for the whole nation has, in some cases, become more pronounced while, at the same time, they are also encouraged to take into account the multiplicity of voices and cultures that actually exist among their audiences and users.

Politically, these developments have led to demands for the public service media to strengthen their commitments to the national culture, as a form of cultural defence against globalism and multiculturalism. This has been supported, not least by right-wing national populist parties, such as the Danish People's Party, the Norwegian Progress Party and the Sweden Democrats. At the same time, more liberal and left-wing cultural and political actors have argued for the public service media to acknowledge the growing diversity in these societies and to provide more culturally and religiously inclusive programming. The mixed pressures on the PSM have had varying outcomes: The balancing act between PSM serving a common national culture, together with a culturally diverse population, has been spelled out somewhat differently and also reflects the political situation in each of the Scandinavian countries.

The formal obligations of the key PSM organizations NRK, SVT and DR, demonstrate these differences in relation to the ways in which they balance different, and potentially oppositional, considerations. In the current stipulations of the Norwegian NRK's obligations (*NRK-plakaten*), it is clearly stated that 'NRK must strengthen the Norwegian language, identity, and culture' and therefore 'a large part of its offerings must have a Norwegian background and reflect Norwegian realities' and 'communicate the cultural heritage of Norway'. At the same time, it also states: 'NRK must communicate knowledge about different groups and the diversity of Norwegian society. NRK must create arenas for debate and information about Norway as a multicultural society'. With regard to religion, we also see obligations that point in the directions of both unity and diversity:

‘NRK must reflect Norway’s religious heritage and the diversity of outlooks and religions in the Norwegian society’ (NRK 2014).

In the case of the Danish DR, we find similarly ambiguous obligations that point towards both unity and diversity in the ‘Public service contract 2015–18’, which is a contract between the state and DR. Here, it is stipulated that ‘DR must put special emphasis on its role as the promoter and communicator of Danish art and culture and the Danish cultural heritage, including the Christian cultural heritage.’ As a new addition to the public service contract it has, for example, been explicitly stipulated that DR, in its annual overview, must report on ‘DR’s communication of the Christian heritage’, a demand supported by the Danish People’s Party. DR must also ‘gather the Danes in big and small communities with content, experiences, and shared events’ at the same time as it must ‘reflect the diversity of culture, philosophy of life, and living condition between the various parts of the kingdom’. It is furthermore stipulated that DR must support integration into Danish society (Kulturministeriet 2014). The official obligations of the Danish DR seem to emphasize national culture and a national unifying role (at the expense of cultural diversity), a focus which is somewhat less evident in the Norwegian NRK.

The official obligations for Swedish SVT put less emphasis on the culturally unifying dimension. The responsibility to cater to the national language, Swedish, is clearly visible, but, generally, the ‘Licence for Swedish Television AB’ (Kulturdepartementet 2013) puts more emphasis on diversity. It states, for instance, that ‘SVT must reflect the many different cultures and cultural expressions existing in Sweden’ and ‘programming activities must as a whole be based on perspectives of equal rights and pluralism’. In general, Swedish public service broadcasters have a mandate from the Swedish government to provide education and entertainment to all citizens, and that includes guidelines about independence, impartiality, and factuality, and the value of freedom of speech. Swedish public service radio has, since 2008, been commissioned to represent the variations in the Swedish population from a perspective of equality and plurality, within a framework of impartiality and factuality. Cultural plurality is to be seen as a ‘natural part’ of the planning and evaluation of SR’s and SVT’s activities. During 2015, Swedish public service television (SVT) also renewed its policy on plurality. Religion, faith, and other life views are to be included among the perspectives from which SVT is to carry out its coverage of Swedish society. In the balancing act between serving a common national culture and multiculturalism, the Swedish SVT thus seems to be more obligated to consider cultural diversity if compared to the two other Scandinavian PSM companies.

Changes in policies towards increasing the diversity in PSM show that during the latter part of the 20th century these were often focused on providing spe-



cial programming services (e.g. news and cultural affairs) for minorities, sometimes in the languages of the minorities in question. This type of minority programming still exists, typically for indigenous minorities, such as the Sami or the Greenlandic minorities, but such policies have increasingly been criticized for supporting ghettoization within the national culture. During recent years, diversity has instead been stimulated within the overall programming for, in principle, all audiences, since this is seen as a way to both encourage integration and to make minorities visible. This ‘mainstreaming’ (Horsti and Hultén 2011) of cultural diversity policies in the PSM has also been a reaction to religiously based controversy and concern in the Nordic countries. As Horsti and Hultén argue (2011), the non-integration of some minorities has become a major concern in the early 21st century after a number of events that seemed to create a polarization between ‘Muslim’ and ‘European’ values.

The ‘mainstreaming’ approach to diversity has, in some cases, had the effect of making PSM managers more conscious of questions relating to diversity, because the visibility of minorities in mainstream programmes has become a more pertinent issue when compared to the strategy that was based on minority programming. In Swedish SVT, the so-called headscarf episode from 2002 prompted the development of diversity policies. The episode concerned a Muslim woman who was denied a position as a television programme host because she wished to wear her hijab. The head of SVT’s corporate responsibility department, Johan Hartman, argued that this incident revealed the need to update SVT’s policy on diversity, saying, ‘These types of questions are not always highly prioritized, but the headscarf debate placed diversity concerns into focus in a new way’ (quoted from Horsti and Hultén 2011, 219). It is, however, not only PSM managers and programme producers, but also audiences and politicians who may react to the visibility (or lack of visibility) of religious minorities and majorities in the PSM. As our case studies in the following chapters will demonstrate, the question about how to represent and frame cultural and religious diversity in the PSM may be the cause of controversy in and of itself (Lövheim and Axner 2011).

## 5.6 Genres and User Interest

The public service media encompass several media forms (radio, television, and Internet-based services) with a range of genres that cover news, current affairs, and entertainment, with a particular responsibility for minorities and children’s programming. Within this wide repertoire, the Scandinavian public service media are involved in all three forms of mediatized religion (Hjarvard 2012).

There is critical journalism on religion within news and actuality programmes. Entertainment programming contains what Hjarvard (2012) has termed ‘banal religion’, the popular cultural uses of bits and pieces of religious symbols and references remixed into drama series and other popular programmes. The third form of mediatized religion is ‘religious media’, usually produced by religious organizations on their premises.

Within the Scandinavian PSM, the continued practice, inspired by the early BBC, of transmitting Christian worship services and of keeping space for devotions based on a Christian tradition come close to the category of religious media. These genres are usually regarded as classical ‘religious programmes’, along with psalms and music programmes with a Christian reference. The category is now renamed ‘life stance’ programmes. However, the diversity is still limited. Although the PSM company has editorial responsibility, most of these programmes are dominated by the Christian religious tradition (and primarily the Lutheran majority churches). In this sense, these programmes could, to some extent, be regarded ‘religious media’ (see Lundby et al. 2018).

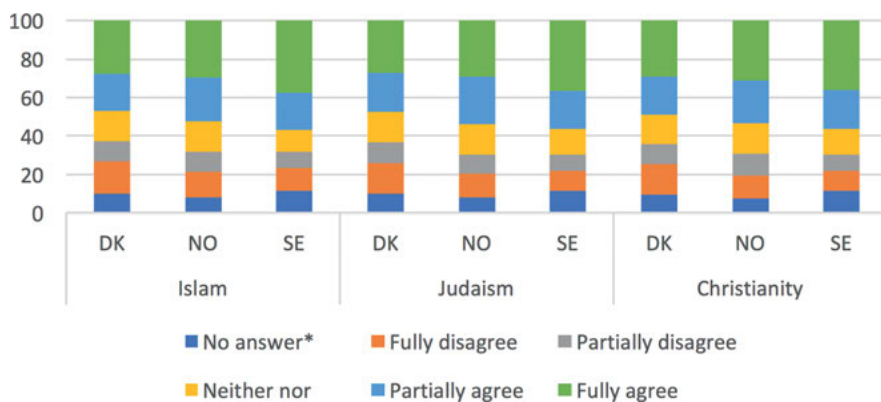
**Table 5.1** Should proclamation programmes in DR/NRK/SVT refer to several religions or only to Christianity? Percentages. From CoMRel survey, April 2015.

	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
The PSMs should not transmit such programmes from any religion	29	33	27
All religions should have the same share of such programmes	8	8	18
The programming should relate to the number of members	10	12	13
Most of such programmes should refer to Christianity	22	26	20
All such programming should refer to Christianity	17	10	6
Do not want to answer / Don't know	15	10	17
Sum	101	99	101
(N)	(1005)	(1099)	(996)

User expectations may differ according to genre. For instance, in a debate programme or talk show with online audience interaction, audiences may expect a certain level of tension, and may be disappointed if the invited speakers are too cordial towards one another. Similarly, some audiences may have very strong opinions that religious devotional programmes have no place on PSM and that religion should only feature in the news or in educational programmes. Yet others may believe that there is too little religious programming across all genres,

and demand that Christianity receive far more positive exposure. In our survey (see Chapter 2) we asked about people's attitudes towards the 'religious programmes'. In Denmark and Norway, the question was related to DR and NRK, respectively, both carrying radio and television channels. In Sweden, the question was restricted to the television company SVT. The proclamation programmes are themselves contested among the audiences, as seen from Table 5.1.

Due to journalistic standards in the regulations of the Scandinavian PSMs which require unbiased and objective coverage, one might expect the PSM users to share this intention. This is not the case when it comes to the coverage of the world religions, where there is a similar pattern in attitudes on the coverage of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Although a majority, around half of the population, fully or partially agree that their PSMs should cover all three religions in an unbiased and objective way, there is a considerable portion of Scandinavians who do *not* think these religions deserve such coverage. One in 4 Danes fully or partially disagrees that the coverage needs to be unbiased and objective. This applies regardless of which religion is at stake. Among the Swedes this is the case for 1 of 5, with the Norwegians positioned in between. (See Figure 5.1).



**Figure 5.1** Public Service Media should only cover Islam/Judaism/Christianity in an unbiased and objective way. Percentages. From CoMRel Survey, April 2015.

*Notes:* For the Danes both DR and TV2 are included as PSM. The Norwegian answers are about NRK only, covering radio as well as television, while the Swedish answers are on SVT television only. Number of responses (N): Denmark 1003, Norway 1090, Sweden 990.

\* 'Do not want to answer' plus 'Don't know'

It seems, thus, that Scandinavians take a stance that leans against religion in general in public service media, regardless of which religious tradition in question.

## 5.7 Implications for Authority

The previous sections outline the conditions offered by PSM in mediating the increased visibility of religious diversity in Scandinavia, in particular with regard to conflicts that concern the public role of religion. Religion is increasingly becoming a diverse and contested phenomenon in the Scandinavian societies, influencing the production of programmes on religion in PSM, and shaping the conditions for their reception and for interaction among media users.

With the change to multi-media platforms, public service media have gone through a transformation, from being monopoly broadcasting to competing cross-platform media companies, which is parallel to the transition José Casanova (2003) describes for public religions in the modern world. They need to accommodate to a shift from the idea of a unitary morally homogeneous nation that is grounded in an (assumed) moral consensus, to a morally, culturally and religiously pluralistic society that must strive for common ground, and a fragile consensus, through public deliberation (Casanova 2003, 128).

The transfer of authority and of an assumed consensus on values and identity are the links between these changes in public religion and the transformations of the public service media. To release audience participation in contemporary PSM, the religious actors appearing in the media must be able to express themselves quickly and clearly in debates and must also relate to a common interest in the public good.

Our studies, to a large extent, draw upon mediatization theory (see Chapter 3), and in particular on the mediatization of religion (see Chapters 3 and 4) and the dynamics of mediatized conflicts (Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjær 2015). Mediatization, in general, challenges existing religious authorities and introduces new or alternative bases for knowledge and authority. 'Changing media structures challenge existing forms of religious authority at the same time as they allow new forms of authority to emerge – forms that have a more individualized and temporary character and rely on popular cultural forms' (Hjarvard 2016, 15). This applies to Scandinavian PSM which still allow designated space for worship and devotions in their programming schedules but mostly cover religion as a contested phenomenon in news and in diffuse forms of 'the religious' in entertainment programmes. The case studies in this section of the book demonstrate the complexity of the implications of mediatization on authority, which

is a global phenomenon (Hoover 2016). In the study of *People and Belief* in SR (Chapter 8), media producers mainly reinforce, rather than challenge, traditional religious authority (chairpersons, imams, professors, mostly men). In the Danish case relating to the documentary series *Rebellion From the Ghetto* (Chapter 7), DR brings in new voices, offering them authority through the careful planning of the debate across media platforms. In the Norwegian ‘cross case’ (Chapter 6), media users turn to a Facebook group to massively critique – or defend – the visibility of religion in PSM news bulletins and in society at large.

Media users seem to react in very similar ways across very different mediatized conflicts (Abdel-Fadil 2016). The following chapters deal with the contested visibility of religion in public service media. To what degree, and in what ways, have these Scandinavian media institutions become actively involved in representing a more diverse spectrum of religious actors and opinions? How do the media users actively respond to the programmes through interactions and interpretations? These are the questions explored in the three case studies on controversies over religion in the public service media.

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